Making Fairbury History Easily Available

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Much of Fairbury's history is contained in old copies of the Blade newspaper. Old copies of the Blade can be easily searched by anyone using the Dominy Memorial Library website. The story of how the old Blades became digitized and made available online is an engrossing saga.

The Blade newspaper traces its roots back to the combination of two competing newspapers. In 1871, the Dimmicks began publishing the Independent newspaper in Fairbury. In 1876, C. B. Holmes started the Blade. These papers were published until 1876 when J. S. Scibird became proprietor. Scibird combined the two newspapers and named the new publication the Independent-Blade.

Each year the Blade was published, they kept a paper copy of each issue. At the end of each year, these issues were bound into a large hard-bound book. The oldest bound book that still exists today dates back to 1877. Before the advent of computers, Blade personnel would retrieve old stories by having employees thumb through the old books.

At some point, the Blade started sending a copy of each paper issue to the University of Illinois. Personnel at the university would photograph the paper issue and make a roll of microfilm. This microfilming process was a manual operation and was, therefore, subject to human error. In a few cases, pages were skipped, or sheets were folded over when photographed.

Microfilm is a plastic-like material that contains a copy of the original document. It is similar to a photographic negative. In 1935, Kodak's Recordak division began filming and publishing The New York Times on reels of 35-millimeter microfilm, marking the beginning of the era of newspaper preservation on film. This method of information storage received the sanction of the American Library Association at its annual meeting in 1936 when it officially endorsed microfilm. For libraries, microfilming allowed permanent storage of paper documents. The microfilm itself took almost no storage space in the library compared to paper documents.

The rolls of microfilm with copies of the Blade newspapers were sent to the Dominy Memorial Library. The library purchased a microfilm reader for the public to access the Blade archives. A library patron was given the roll of microfilm. Each roll usually corresponded to one calendar year. The patron took the roll to the microfilm viewer. The end of the roll had to be threaded carefully into the viewing machine. The patron could then slowly spin the roll and look forward or backward to see different Blade issues.

The microfilm reader also had a print option. The patron could select an article, push a button, and a paper copy of that article would be printed. The library charged a nominal fee per printed page to cover the cost of printing materials.

To use the microfilm, the patron had to know the date the article was printed in the Blade. There was no easy way to search by keyword in the Blade archives. It took a considerable amount of time and patience to locate the articles of interest. For these reasons, very few people were able to access Fairbury's history easily.

In 2016, the printer on the library's microfilm viewer broke. Because the viewer was obsolete, the printer could not be repaired. Researchers had to take their digital cameras with them and photograph the viewing screen on the microfilm viewer. Library management decided to digitize the old reels of microfilm. Using donations, the library hired an outside firm to convert the microfilm reels to online, word-searchable content. The online Blade archives are similar to the Pantagraph and Chicago Tribune, which have been digitized for many years. The library decided to make access free to everyone. The Blade archives can be accessed by visiting the Dominy Memorial Library website, selecting the "Resources" tab, and then choosing the "The Blade Archive" option.

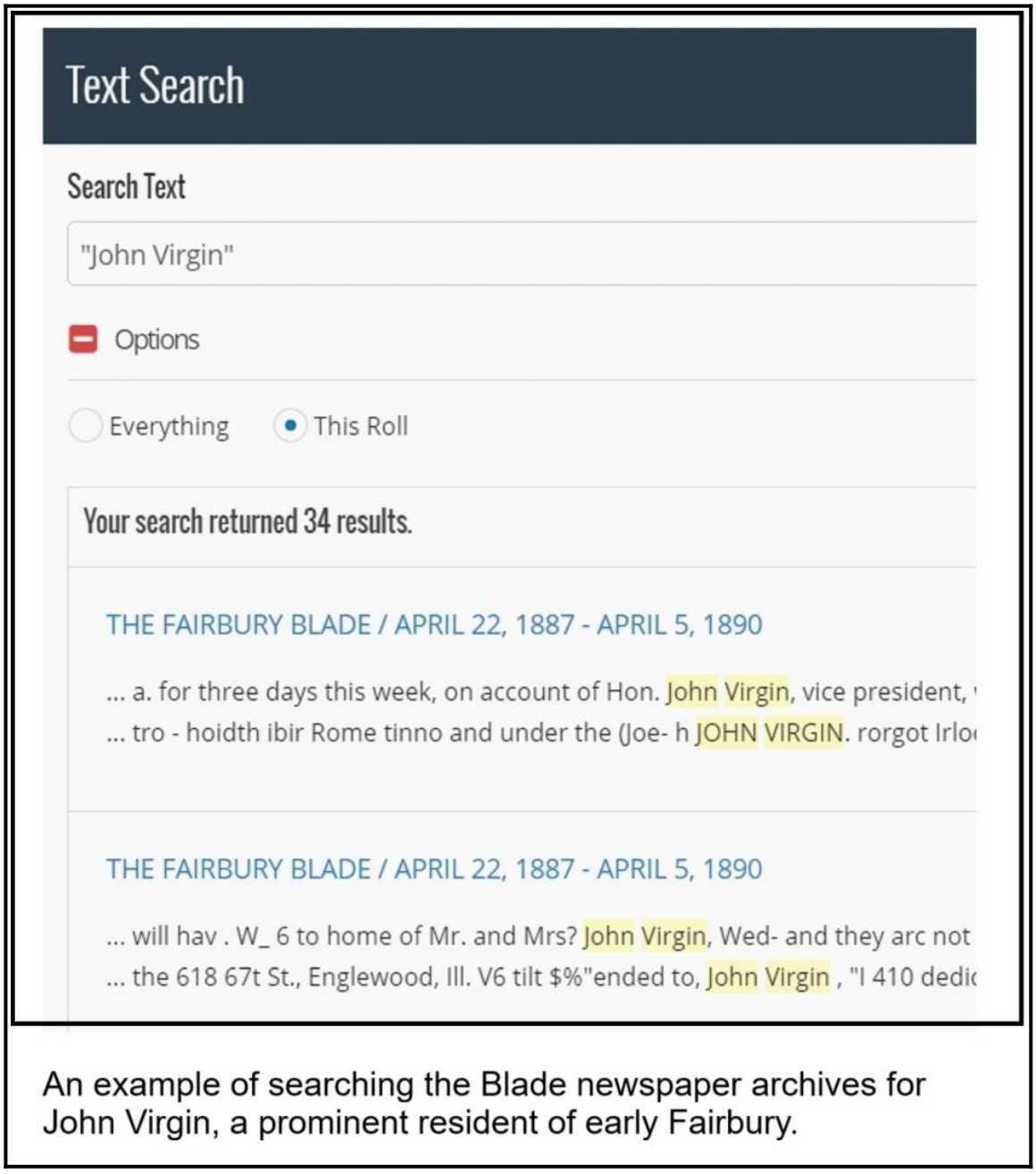
It is still beneficial to know what year you are searching for when using the online content. If a word search is performed on all the years of the Blade using a common word, more than 1,000 hits will be found. It is impractical to review each of the 1,000 hits individually. On the library website, you can select which year to search. Searching in a particular year is the most efficient method of searching. You can print or download any images that are found.

In 2017, the Blade closed its Fairbury office and relocated the last 20 years of the large Blade-bound books to the Leader office in Pontiac. The Blade generously donated the older bound books to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. Volunteers moved the books and their bookcases from the Blade office to the second floor of the Fairbury Echoes Museum. When the Blade ceased publication at the end of 2022, the remainder of the bound books were donated to the Fairbury Echoes Museum.

The Fairbury Echoes Museum has 113 printed and bound copies of the old Blade newspaper in its collection. They date from 1877 to 1999. Unfortunately, 12 of the old books are missing. The fate of the missing books remains unknown. Most of the disappeared issues date back to the early 1900s.

The old paperbound books remain valuable, even though the material has been digitized and is now available online. Sometimes, the microfilming of the page did not produce a clear image, making it illegible online. If the old paperbound book is available, a legible copy of that page can be obtained by photographing the paper copy. Almost all the photos online are illegible. If the old bound book is available, a digital camera can be used to photograph the original image in the paper edition.

The online Blade archives are not perfect. For example, if the original microfilm copy of the paper Blade was poor, a word search will not find that word. But compared to the microfilm reader system, the online Blade archives are phenomenal. History researchers can search 150 years of Blades from their cell phone or computer at home. Thanks to the Dominy Memorial Library, the Blade archives have been digitized, making Fairbury history readily available to everyone.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An example of searching the Blade newspaper archives for John Virgin, a prominent resident of early Fairbury.